A unique bond

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Byline: Erinn Unger Skagit Valley Herald, Skagit Valley Herald, Mount Vernon, Wash.

Body

Jan. 22--Jeff Guidry had just been through the fight of his

Jlife, when Freedom took him under her wing. He was taking the rescued bald eagle out for their usual walk, on a dark, drizzly November day, after receiving the best of news -- that after weeks of chemotherapy to treat stage III non-Hodgkins lymphoma, he was cancer-free.

Guidry had walked her to the side of the hill when he realized something extraordinary -- she had both her wings wrapped around him.

"That's the only time she's ever done that," he said. "The day that I was told the cancer was gone."

Guidry is the president of the board of directors at Sarvey Wildlife Center in Arlington. He volunteers regularly, helping at the center and traveling with Freedom around the region to educate people about wildlife, about the center and how they can make a difference.

First meeting

In 1998, Freedom came to Sarvey malnourished, lice-ridden and barely able to stand. It looked like she had fallen about 80 feet through some trees in Seattle.

"I started there a couple of years before she showed up, and I just happened to be there the day she was brought in. I took her to the vet," he said. "Our bond literally started the day she came in, I just didn't know it yet."

Both of Freedom's wings were broken, her six-foot wingspan crippled and even with Guidry's encouragement, she would collapse in her cage.

"Working in the wildlife center, eventually you need to have an emotional wall," he said. "You see great things happen and really tragic things happen."

For seven weeks the staff cared for Freedom, feeding her and giving her medicine, but she still could not stand. Eventually a deadline was set to end her suffering.

"I was drawn to her," Guidry said. He would talk softly to her, encouraging her.

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Freedom was about 24 hours from her "being let go from this world," Guidry said, when something remarkable happened.

"When I walked in there she was standing up in the dog cage," he said. "... That's really when we started. I realized there really was a bond."

Realizing that with her still crippled wing she couldn't be released into the wild, Guidry began training Freedom on a glove, which was a learning experience for both of them.

Her left wing was permanently injured, and so when he would train her on his left hand, which is traditionally the gloved hand when handling birds, she would turn around. Freedom did this to hide her injured wing from him, just as she would hide a vulnerability in the wild. She still had her instincts, but unlike most bald eagles, she was at ease in front of a crowd, making her a good candidate for teaching people about eagles.

"She's a great ambassador," Guidry said.

When doing a presentation, Guidry likes to educate people about Freedom, but also likes to see where audience questions take them.

He said a person can see a bald eagle in books or in a movie, but when you see one in person and up close, there's a big difference, especially when "... she's just hanging out and digging it."

Therapy, friendship

Guidry continued working with Freedom during his illness.

"I liked it and it was also an escape. When you've got a bird on the glove you've got to be very focused, because they're very powerful animals," he said. "That gives you this 20 to 30 minutes of being somewhere else."

Guidry has traveled far and wide with Freedom, even bringing her into hotel rooms, where she likes to sit on her perch and pluck strips of venison from his hand.

"She very much likes to be in front of the crowd and the cameras," he said. "She's grown up in front of people."

Freedom has been in front of crowds at presentations, a book tour and even a college football game.

"She just fit right in and she was a star," Guidry said of their time at a Washington State-Utah football game, where Freedom stood on his hand in front of 30,000 people.

He looked back at one point and saw her face next to his on the scoreboard "five stories tall," he said. "She was stellar out there."

Though Freedom is comfortable around people, Guidry reminds that she grew up in the wild and in a nest.

"One of the most important aspects is that Freedom is not a pet," he said. "... She's got all of her instincts ... she's not tame and she never does tricks."

Now 14 years old, Freedom has taught Guidry patience over the years, he said, and has made him laugh. Their relationship is perhaps more like a sister and a good friend.

It's an honor for him to work with her, Guidry said.

"There's an amount of respect," he said. "And how much I have to be able to do this with her."

n Erinn Unger can be reached at 360-416-2141 or at eung er@skagitpublishing.com Follow her on Twitter at www. twitter.com/schools_svh.

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